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The Report Committee for Ling-lin Ku
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A Fever Called Living

APPROVED BY
SUPERVISING COMMITTEE:

Amy Hautt, Supervisor

Richard E. McMaster, Co-Supervisor

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Ling-lin Ku

Report

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Dedication

This report is dedicated to my dear family and friends, near and far, particularly my twin
Ling-Ying Ku: you are always in my work.

Acknowledgements

I have received so much love and encouragement from my dear family, friends, peers, and faculty; this work would not have been possible without their unfailing support.

I would like to express my profound gratitude to my thesis supervisors: Amy Hautt and Eric McMaster, their doors are always open for me. My committee members: Jeff Williams, Mike Smith, and Jack Stoney; their honest feedback has been crucial for my studio development.

Abstract

A Fever Called Living

Ling-lin Ku, MFA

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Supervisor: Amy Hauff

Co-Supervisor: Richard E. McMaster

A Fever Called Living is a floor-based installation that bridges fantasy and reality by mining digital features to create physical objects. The works hint at my past while reflecting my research interests in Animism and the uncanny, language play, fetishism, and display. I find that working back and forth between my mind and hands, the virtual and the physical, is like wandering without specific destination, like abandoning the sidewalk for the open field.

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Dualism

I am always trying to fuse different, often conflicted, things, into one. I tell lies, inventing the better situation in which I want to believe and live. I dream, sometimes wishing to never have to wake up, sometimes wondering if my life is just a dream. I fantasize, to free my mind from actual consequence. The thing is, I often ask myself: am I crazy or not?

I was born an identical twin (Figure 1). As a twin, my world began as dual. My twin sister and I invented secret languages, imaginative toys, shared alter egos, and ongoing narratives in an exclusive world that still exists in our adult life. Living apart from one another in different countries, we chat every day, and that dual world continues to evolve. For a long time I could not separate my own identity from that of my twin. To me, I was she, and she, me.

But an identical thing is not truly possible. Now, as an adult I am naturally drawn to the idea of duality, separate but identical things with uncanny incongruences. As a twin, I am the subject of my own question: what is the same, what are the differences? Can two objects be the same? If two objects really are the same, are they one thing or two?

Animism and the Uncanny

I was born and raised in Taiwan. I grew up in a culture that celebrate Animism; influenced by the Dao belief that every object has a kind of unseen life and energy that connects with human affairs and is capable of interrupting or effecting human interests. From deities and ancestor worship to business mascots and advertisements, all are effected by the idea of a parallel world connected to our lived world.

For example, people make elaborate paper offerings on “Tomb Sweeping Day.” Fantastically detailed realistic paper objects of all kinds, from food, clothing, jewelry, to life-sized motorcycles or doll house-like villas, are made and purchased to be burnt as offerings to the deceased. In this way the deceased receives what they always wanted. They receive these gifts in the other world once the offerings are burned to ash. I am enchanted by these exquisitely crafted paper objects yet also disturbed by their uncanny verisimilitude and the tension that suggests a desire to reconstruct a new world in the hereafter.

Animism is not only associated with folk or spiritual beliefs. In Japan, technology has been saturated with the ancient Shinto religion: rapid technological developments allow for the creation of things ever more human-like. These functions are embodied in almost all aspects of life, reshaping our relationship to inanimate objects. For example, when technology can manage multiple aspects of a person’s life – from auto-adjusting the temperature in one’s house, to tracing and prescribing one’s medical treatment – subject-object relationships start to blur. In the same spirit, the more humanoid a robot, the more emotional the human attachment.

After all, people are naturally drawn to objects and images with human form or behaviors, such as a smiley face-like stain or recognizing the wanderings of a drunk in a

plastic bag blown around by the wind. Yet in the process of coming to life, uncanny things happen. While combining an enlarged egg-shaped dome with rigid, black raven legs, a narrative of death and birth appears. The tensions and nuance between strange and familiar create an eeriness.

I think of E.T. A. Hoffmann's *The Sandman*¹. In this short novel, the sandman gathers eyeballs in his attempt to create the life-like woman, Olympia, but in vain. His automation was described as beautiful yet lifeless, strange, and "uncanny." One hundred years later, Sigmund Freud published his essay *Das Unheimliche (The Uncanny)* about the eeriness of dolls and wax figures. To him, the uncanny locates strangeness in the ordinary; it is conscious recognition of the familiar but repressed repulsion that generates a feeling of the uncanny. In the 1970's, Japanese roboticist Masahiro Mori coined the term "Uncanny Valley"², describing our preference for human-like form, yet when human representation appears close but not quite human, people experience revulsion, developing a sense of disturbance and unease. The theory of Uncanny Valley explains the creepiness of humanoid objects and robots: since Mori's paper was translated into English in 2012, it has been widely studied in 3D computer animation, film study, and media art. With increasing interest in virtual reality, augmented reality, and photo realistic computer animation, our desire to see human forms in inanimate objects and the simulacra of animation and robots leads to uneasy questions about what, exactly, is human.

¹ E.T.A. Hoffmann, "The Sandman," first published in German in 1816, <https://almabooks.com/wp-content/uploads/2016/10/The-Sandman-Excerpt.pdf> (accessed May 2, 2019)

² Masahiro Mori, "The Uncanny Valley," 2012. <https://ieeexplore.ieee.org/document/6213238> (accessed May 2, 2019)

A Fever Called Living uses recognizable objects in different scales, materials, and contexts to generate unfamiliarity. Disguised from everyday life, these objects, through hybridizing and approximation, are sometimes delightful (such as the giant gummy bears in the crack of a wall that seem like a vein of ore to be mined) and sometimes unsettling (such as the fragmented body parts scaled up and inserted throughout the installation). I consider them hints of an ascetic crime scene where my secrets are hidden yet also want to be found.

Language Play

Language is how we perceive the world and communicate with one another. In many ways, a person's world is constructed by the language she uses. Some of the most commonly used Chinese characters were originally pictograms, symbolized denotations of objects. Other characters are phono-semantic, compounds that combine a semantic indicator to suggest its general meaning, and a phonetic indicator to specify its pronunciation. The meaning changes when paired with another image/symbol, or another phonetic compound. For example, 日 is the symbol of sun, while 月 represents moon, yet when 日 and 月 are put together, 明, it creates new meanings: “dawn”, “next”, and also “luminosity.” If three 日 are stacked together, 晶, it becomes “crystal”, or “glitters”, and can also mean “someone's hard work”.

Even though when making, I think in English, the way I arrange objects still reflects my native pictogram-based language logic. Objects become characters become symbols and signs; I piece them together or play with different arrangements, echoing the original but creating new meanings (Figure 2).

Language structure brings me a lifetime of joy for puns and language play. When one word is close enough to another, it can slip into another meaning thereby creating situational humor. Even in English, not being a native speaker allows me freedom to play with the language without regard for the rules, inventing new meanings. Nuts become balls, a pickle become a neck, that become a dick. Language, just like form, is forever in the process of shifting form, stretching, laying open.

Fetish and Adult Play

My studio is a playground, an alchemy of the world where I bridge my daydreams with my quotidian that surrounds. During childhood, my twin sister and I would project our imaginations onto ordinary things to create imaginary toys when our actual toys were out of reach. We would see a worn, pale pencil eraser as a melting pat of butter, a tape dispenser became a snail, a wound was an opening into a microscopic animate world...we had good time inventing our own toys.

Revisiting this kind of fantasy play allows me, as an adult, to create the complex visual language with my sculpture. I often start with local references such as body parts and food products. By playing with the expectations of context and collaging incompatible parts into hybrids, I create objects beyond our conventional understanding of the physical world, where seemingly familiar things are suddenly empowered with alternative identities.

I use play as a tool for being or becoming, an open access of continuous activities for creating existential meaning. Johan Huizinga writes in *Homo Ludens*³:

“Play is older than culture, is for culture”.

Play is creative in that it offers players different degrees of expression inherent in the activities themselves; to play is to make a world, shared yet ultimately personal. Toys serve as transitional objects to which children build external and interpersonal relationships. Through games, children learn to integrate into the group, practice for adult

³ Johan Huizinga, *Homo Ludens*. Paladin, 1970.

society. Humans can play with almost any kind of object yet play requires freedom, and requires no consequences.

As adults, our imaginations are under constant threat of being smoothed out and thinned down by the demands of contemporary life. Adult play is often made seem repressed or even corrupt, yet sex fantasy, deviance, and fetish are playful expressions of liberation from repressive social conventions. I think of Edgar Allen Poe's, *The System of Doctor Tarr and Professor Fether*⁴, in which the patients of a mental institution mimic "normal" people yet becoming ever more absurd in their attempts to act, "normal". I find this reminiscent of my attempts at reimaging and re-forming "ordinary" things when I stumble upon extraordinary moments. A Fever Called Living incorporates fetishized body parts and various objects into an overall structure, creating a treasure-hunt-game-like experience or fetishized crime scene for viewers. Undergarments and an enlarged pecan, feet and big toe, nuts and tea bags are androgynous characters but also sly innuendos for my inside jokes (Figure 3).

⁴ Edgar Allen Poe, *The Complete Works of Edgar Allen Poe*. G.P. Putnam's Sons: Knickerbocker Press, 1902.

Process

My creative process uses digital scanning and rendering technologies to mine my dreams and imagination. Working in digital space is a way to jump into a multi-dimensional rabbit hole where I precisely distort recognizable forms, reassigning their identities through hybridizing, recomposing, altering materials and hyperbolic scale shifts. I freely visualize my fantasies in digital space and then print them into existence as physical objects. Like the distorted offspring of my sculpture, these digital sketches also work as the building blocks for my short animations (Figure 4).

Starting with the idea of a topographical map, I make a floor-base grid installation with bird's-eye view perspective (Figure 5). It has no specific beginning or end, remaining open for viewers to freely explore. Its long, stretched-out rectangular structure invites a viewer's slow meander. This structure acts as a platform for a series of overlapping, non-linear, narrative sculptures that echo and exaggerate the ordinary rituals and details of my daily life. The thrill of forgetting about destination, being drawn in by tiny details that result in personal pathways of exploration, these are core aspects of the work (Figure 6). Symbols of urban landscape, construction sites, architecture, bedroom, furniture, and everyday objects are not representations of space but rather: space of representation. The digital process allows me to build a fantasy world but also to create my own absence. I bridge the two worlds by mining digital features with physical objects: the glitch-like elements are subtle traces of a suddenly revealed reality. Repetitive fruit barcodes, a pixilated quilt, a stretched vase, each are imaginative imperfect moments transformed into permanent time chunks. I regard them as displacements of the site and self, a heightened reveal or realization of the reality in elsewhere (Figure 7).

The installation is a fusion of digital rendering processes and physical objects. Whether working in 3D modeling or animation software, I combine virtual language components with my objects. For example, instead of creating a “real” surface, I choose an online brick wall texture image and print directly on the surface of the sculpture to create a hallway-like structure (Figure 8). This is influenced by texture mapping techniques in the 3D rendering process, that use 2D imagery to wrap around a 3D object resulting in real –but actually virtual–objects. I am interested in the separation and confusion of surface and form that the 3D rendering method can accomplish, creating a blend of physical and tactile processes. By placing objects low to the ground or stretched out high above, the objects coexist in mismatched scale, together creating continually shifting viewpoints that reflect the constantly shifting perspectives encountered within computerized digital space (Figure 9).

I think of composing my objects akin to musical composition: like musical structures, the expositing, the developments that refer to a canon, the mirroring, and variations are the similar forms and formats I employ when arranging objects and designing their structures. *A Fever Called Living* is akin to a symphony, its various sections built high and low, loose or dense; they are different music movements, played in rubato. Having spent a decade in classical piano training, I am particularly drawn to Robert Schumann’s piano work *Kreisleriana*⁵, and am influenced by its character, Johannes Kreisler, (not, coincidentally, created by E.T.A. Hoffmann), and his reflections on the split personalities and double characters he created in this musical composition.

⁵ Robert Schumann, *Kreisleriana*, Op. 16. F. Whistling, 1850

End

Song of Childhood by Peter Handke⁶

When the child was a child,
It was the time for these questions:
Why am I me, and why not you?
Why am I here, and why not there?
When did time begin, and where does space end?
Is life under the sun not just a dream?
Is what I see and hear and smell
not just an illusion of a world before the world?
Is there truly evil,
and people who are evil?
How can it be that the I, who I am,
didn't exist before I came to be,
and that, someday, the I who I am,
will no longer be who I am?

⁶ Handke, Peter. *Song of Childhood*. Basis-Film-Verleih GmbH and Argos Film. 1987

Figures



Figure 1: *Me and My Twin*, date unknown.



Figure 2: *Trypophobia*. 2018. 3D prints, bronze, plywood, bendy ply, sand, wood, paint. 80"x6"x25".



Figure 3: *A Fever Called Living (detail I)*. 2019. Wood and 3D prints. 16"x10"x 7".

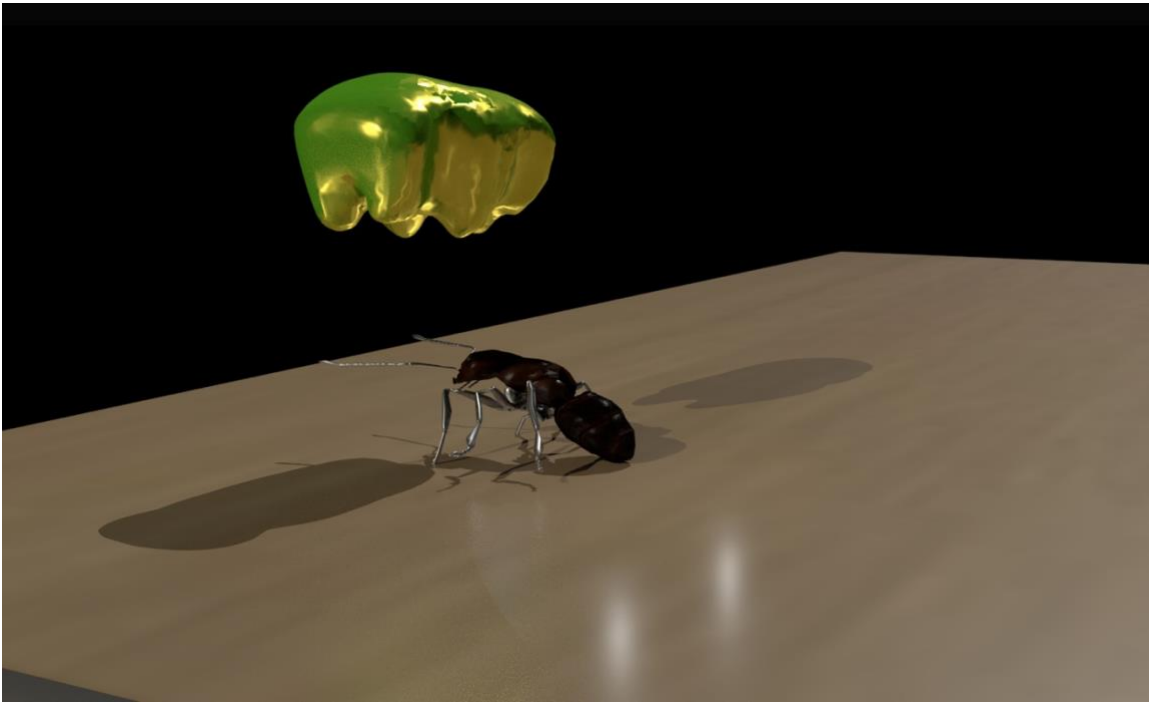


Figure 4: *Ant* (still image from video clip), 2018. 3D animation (MAYA), 28 sec.

<https://youtu.be/6prFMyalGOY>



Figure 5: *A Fever Called Living (bird's-eye view)*, 2019. 3D prints, UV prints, MDF, Bendy Ply, plywood, foam, wood, steel, rubber, plaster, fabric, paper, paint. Appx. 250"x 200"x 210".



Figure 6: *A Fever Called Living (detail II)*, 2019. Digital print on paper, Powder 3D print, resin, paint. Dimension varies.



Figure 7: *A Fever Called Living (detail III)*. 2019. UV Prints, MDF, paint. Dimension varies.



Figure 8: *A Fever Called Living (detail IV)*, 2019. Foam, MDF, plaster, rubber, paint, UV ink print on vinyl. Appx. 40"x 40" x 12".



Figure 9: *A Fever Called Living* (overall view), 2019. 3D prints, UV prints, MDF, Bendy Ply, plywood, foam, wood, steel, rubber, plaster, fabric, paper, paint. Appx. 250"x 200"x 210".

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